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Coping With Holiday Stress

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‘Tis the season to be jolly—and stressed out! For many, increased demands and expectations during the holidays can be overwhelming. Rather than being a time of joy and celebration, many homes are filled with tension, conflict and disappointment.

Several factors contribute to the onset of anxiety, depression and excessive indulgence at this time of year. Most of us begin establishing expectations for the holidays during childhood. What was once a magical and exciting time of year can turn into a dreaded annual chore if we carry unrealistic childlike expectations into adulthood. We may feel responsible for creating the perfect holiday season for our loved ones only to feel guilty or inadequate when we do not succeed.

Commercialism and media hype place pressure on us to over-consume which only burdens us with consumer debt, additional weight and emotional fatigue—all which we must try to rid ourselves of after the holidays.

The intense social and cultural pressure to experience nothing but bliss every holiday season becomes particularly painful for those suffering a loss in their lives—whether through death, divorce, job termination or serious health problems. Participating in holiday activities can surface painful emotions and memories, serving as a sad reminder that someone or something is missing.

It is often difficult enough to meet the challenges of our daily responsibilities, let alone cope with the extra demands of time, energy and money associated with the holidays.

Can these all-too-common holiday traps be avoided? Yes! There are ways to manage these seasonal stressors without canceling the holiday season altogether! Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Be realistic.** Few of us have ideal families, unlimited resources or perfect lives. Stop putting pressure on yourself to magically create a perfect scenario during the holidays.
2. **Communicate.** Families often stick to rituals that are stress-producing or have lost their original pleasure. Talk to your loved ones about what has meaning for you at this time in your life.
3. **Take care of yourself.** Don’t overextend yourself to the point that a pleasure turns into a burden. Set limits in terms of your commitments so that you have time for rest, exercise, good nutrition and quality time with loved ones.
4. **Be independent.** It’s easy to get caught up with trying to compete with others

because of the intense commercial hype surrounding the holidays. Think for yourself. Make plans that feel right for you. Organize a group and go caroling at a local hospital or nursing home. Give gifts, eat, drink and socialize on *your* terms.

5. **Plan ahead.** Take inventory of past failures and disappointments and plan differently this year. Ask for support and assistance from family members so that no one is overtaxed.
6. **Be creative.** Make your own traditions. Focus more on spirituality and interpersonal closeness rather than upon materialism and over-consumption.

One gift you can give yourself is the gift of physical and emotional health. This is not such an easy thing to do during this time of year. But remember: By taking care of yourself and planning the holiday you *really* want, you can make this holiday season one that you and your loved ones will enjoy and cherish. You may even find that the true spirit of the season stays with you long after all the gifts are opened.

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